

## Gushing Tears from Wistful Totems

An Interview by Kim Hye-soon<sup>1)</sup>

KIM Hye-soon It seems to me there is scarcely a material that is more attractive than wood to artists. When alive, a tree cannot move itself. Only after it dies and becomes lumber can it gain mobility as a piece of furniture, a mortuary plank, a washboard, or firewood. In your work, a dead tree becomes a woman's body. What do you say to the wood when you work? What kind of wood do you choose? Do you have a motive in working with wood?

YUN Suknam Actually there was a very specific motive. In the early 1990s, I visited the birthplace of Huh Nan-seol-heon<sup>2)</sup> in Gangneung. There were many persimmon trees in the orchard there. I brought home one of the fallen branches and carved Huh Nan-seol-heon on the wood. As I was preparing the wood, it occurred to me that wood was like a woman's skin. Because wood is hard, it is quite possible to think it is not a 'feminine material.' However, the feeling I got when I touched that fallen branch of a persimmon tree was that of a woman's skin; it was very warm. I began looking for more wood after that. I went to a lumber yard and found there was plenty of scrap wood. Lumber yards cut off the rounded parts of logs to make them square. I bought the round parts, waste pieces that are usually sold off as firewood. The grain of the wood was soft and wrinkled, like the skin of an old woman. Leaving the wood surface as is, I painted a face, and it became a woman. I have conversations as I paint. Once I put eyes on the face, I get a strong feeling that the wood itself has become the woman in the paint.

Wood is a dangerous material. Humans have used it for thousands of years, and it could easily be perceived as uninspiring and conservative. Despite that, I could not but use it. Once one touches the rippled pattern and the wrinkled skin of a piece of wood, how can one not work with it! That is how attractive wood is for me.

KIM It is interesting that you discovered a ductile, warm, and wrinkled skin in a solid, cold, uninspiring, and conservative material. You said you saw patterns of water and waves in dead wood; what it sounds like to me is that you found life in it.

The fact that you moved from painting to working with wood and installation seems to entail more than just a shift in materials you use, but a shift in world view

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1) Kim Hye-soon, a poet and a long-time friend of the artist, is Professor of Creative Writing at Seoul Institute of the Arts-translator

2) Huh Nan-seol-heon(1563-1589). Born to a family of noble standing and literary talents, she is considered one of the most brilliant poets from the Middle Joseon period. Her career was cut short by unhappy marriage and untimely death-translator

itself. An artist depends wholly on the material's texture, and on her physical strength and mobility, when making representation through installation vis-à-vis working on a canvas. Your paintings showed mothers carrying large pouches dangling about them; the flourishing strength of round, soft, and tenacious mothers exploded concentrically. What I read in those early paintings of yours were the "vigorous sorrows" and the days of our mothers, mothers who suppressed the tears storming inside as vendors striding along, with stocks of goods weighing heavy on their heads. Since then I have seen again and again the explosion of women? vigorous grief, and the encounter of the round sadness from your earliest paintings with the wooden figures in later works—I have seen them through your repeated ceremonies for mothers; the grotesque and the spinous in your work; paintings and installation works imbued with bone-chilling anger and icy tears; encounters with a river-load of women; and finally the current show. In this show in particular, I am witnessing the birth of the Yun Suknam school of female aesthetics, expressed through the sophisticated, beautiful, haunting, and erotic female figures. Why do the materials, forms, expressions, and bodies change in your work over the course of your lifetime?

YUN I like going to market places. I like the lively, rough, and raw voices, laughter, and yelling and squalling. The women in my earliest works, the oil paintings, are women who are found in these market places. What I feel from them is not simply sadness but also fortitude. Their images became my paintings during that period. I painted them for about ten years. But the flat surface was stifling. I wanted to tell stories that were more dramatic, more directly-felt, and tactile; the flat surface did not provide a solution. I wanted to break out of the wall.

By the time I went to the United States again in 1989, I had been thinking for years about how I can come out of the wall and talk to people directly; but I felt stuck at the time, and I thought I might give up art all together. Eventually, I discovered 'installation' for myself, the first of which was the wood carving of Huh Nan-seol-heon. So, the desire to communicate more directly long preceded the change in my work to 'installation.' A theatrical element is a big part of installation work. It's an enormous amount of fun for me. I might return to flat surface. But, as of now I am still enamored with the theatrical effects of installation, and the strong feelings they bring.

I cannot but use everyday items in my work, because my works are about everyday stories. A chair is a good example. Where a woman spends most of her time at home is in the kitchen, where the dining table is. But do women enjoy a meal sitting down on a chair by the dining table? Women certainly hover about the kitchen, but they are actually absent there. I did the "chair" works to tell the story

about this absence and the precariousness of women`s place. At the beginning, I started out with my mother. Actually, if it were not for telling my mother`s story, I probably would not have been able to tell my story. It`s not so much a change in the medium; like going through a rite of passage, I could not but tell my mother`s story.

KIM What you are saying is that a rite of passage into installation was a sine qua non, for telling a story that can be touched with hands. Installation artists and sculptors are people who proclaim their totems to the world, to the times they live. In your show *Seeding the Lights*(1993) you had 999 totems. You seem to refuse to make a pagoda of one thousand<sup>3)</sup> and choose to let the totems flow by, and the women seem more in the process of being erased rather than being painted on those totems. For the 1995 Venice Biennale`s <*Tiger`s Tail*>,<sup>4)</sup> you showed *Mother`s Story* and *A Prayer for Wandering Souls*, for which you used many scores of lit candles. What ardent wish do you have that you proclaim these pining totems, the women, in these materials and in these forms to the world, and light a candle in front of them? What ardent wish do you have that you elongate women? limbs as if they are made of elastic dough? They seem to be related to sisterhood and also to women? sorrow and aspiration. Whenever I saw your installations in the past, I felt as though I was looking at an offering table in which a woman`s body-turned-totem was being offered in place of jibang<sup>5)</sup>. But more recently, these totems seem to come alive. They have become too lively and dynamic to be placed on an offering table for dead ancestors. Your works are becoming younger by the day. What is the totem that you established or want to establish in this world?

YUN One hundred candles were lighted for *Mother`s Story* in Venice. The candlelight in the exhibition was meant to be ceremonial, not casual. We tremble the most when we light a candle. We become solemn. Even our breath is held. Of course, the luminosity is nice, but I wanted to revive such solemnity, reverence, and the love and sympathy that would make one hold one`s breath. We do not live the lives that our mothers lived. As you mentioned in your book *What It Means for Women to Write*,<sup>6)</sup> motherhood is transient and hollow. I am aware of it, and I feel it; but at the same time I feel something is missing. I have an acute sense of sadness about the debilitation of mothers`s lives. I have not used candles since the exhibition in Venice, and I think that is because the Venice show brought a certain

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3) This is reference to a Buddhist belief that the number 1,000 signifies fullness, or completeness -tr.

4) Special Exhibition for Korean Contemporary Art: *Tiger`s Tail*, Venice Biennale, 1995 -tr.

5) Jibang, or a "spirit tablet," is an essential part of the offering table at ancestor worship ceremonies in Korea. It is a piece of paper identifying the family member or members being commemorated and is burned as part of the ceremony -tr.

6) Kim Hye-soon, *Yeoseongi geureul sseundaneun geot*(What it means for women to write), Munhakdongnae, Seoul, 2002 -tr.

sense of closure for me. The stretching of bodies in my current work is an expression of my wish. Truly, I wish the body would expand, as when we put our arms around each other's shoulders, and connect with someone. But in life, even among women, connecting is not easy. I think that is because human beings are, by nature, basically lonely. There is a lot that women, in particular, cannot achieve even though they like connecting with each other and would like to achieve something through that bonding. For women who stay home in particular, they have tremendous hidden desires, but they remain hidden.

KIM You wanted to recognize the sadness of our mothers' lives and commemorate them, and you have a desire to communicate with other women; if I heard you correctly, these made the bodies in your work expand. This may be impolite to you the artist, but let's condense the body of your work to a simple code of 'motherhood.' In the beginning, your work attempted to iconize 'the mother.' You then showed us the horrible nightmares about rooms from where mothers have disappeared. Following that, you are now painting the footprints in which one can feel the life and movement of an artist who has become the mother. Looking at your current work, it feels as though the artist who has now become the mother? is sitting in the empty room of the nightmare, in that chair, and looking at another mother. It is as if out of a death called 'mother' you pulled a life called 'mother.' To put it in another way, it seems that from the image of a diachronically existing mother you have pulled out a synchronically existing mother: a mother from around you, or the mother within you. Do you want to start living the pains of other women? Or are you disclosing your own pains?

YUN With the end of the Mother series, I began the Pink Room series. I felt that I was done with the mother series. It felt like the end of a long gut.<sup>7)</sup> I now had the courage to tell my story. *Pink Room* is my story. It's the story of the mothers around me. I wanted to show 'my' place, the place of mothers. Actually, it has not been very long since I had my own room. Talking about the place of my life led me naturally into the pink room series. The chairs in the Pink Room series are Western chairs, not Korean. I upholstered them with Korean fabrics. The awkward meeting of the Western and Korean seems to speak for the insecure place of the women who can neither stay in the bedroom nor the kitchen. We are neither Western nor Korean but very vulgar. That is the image of us, of me.

KIM It seems to me that the early- to mid-1990s was when your work was the most intense. Looking back, I feel that your art world and my poetry world follow a similar trajectory. It occurs to me that anyone who is 'seized' by femininity must cross the river of the suffering called the grotesque. How did you go through that

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7) gut: A shamanic ritual -tr.

turbulent province and arrive at where you are now? You couldn't tell if you slept or dreamt; the person who may be 'the one' in the dream is painted black and standing on tiptoes; metal claws grow by leaps every night out of a pink sofa; the four legs of the chair, metal clawed, walk about the house, making creaky noises; and the loose beads on the floor roll about the disastrous scene as if they are red blood cells. How did you come across these hysterical dreams of a woman gone mad, the ruinous scenes of an internal war? Did the sadness and comfort of drawing an explosive amount help consciously or unconsciously?

YUN In Pink Room one cannot stand on the beads that cover the floor. Try standing on them, and you will fall. In fact, during the show, a visitor tried to enter the room and fell down. We had to put a rope to keep people out. Every night, I had the same dream? a nightmare; I had to go somewhere but could not. Not a night passed without the same dream. I wanted to express this frustration with fluorescent pink. A fluorescent pink drives one crazy. So I did that for about two years, and finally I got bored. I felt that I was humiliating myself too much, and I could not stand it anymore. That's when I moved my studio, and I did only drawing for three years after that. I think that is how I was healed again, even though they were really very small drawings.

KIM Women's labor is trivial. Cooking, cleaning, giving birth, and raising children, at a glance, seem divorced from society. Your work is about what you discovered from the hands that deliver these debilitating and secondary labors. In your work Mother VI, a washboard is one of the materials used. In other works following that you use other materials found at a garbage dump - furniture, pieces of mother-of-pearl decoration from a dresser, and wood from crates - to construct or constrict a woman's body. Why does a woman's face, in acrylic paint, spread out of the wood slats that imprison her and keep her behind a closed window? Why don't you have any desire to make your work appeal to aristocratic and elegant tastes?

YUN Let me try to answer your question about the materials first. As you know, I had a studio in the basement of an apartment building. One sees a lot of cast-off furniture around an apartment building. I always felt sorry whenever I saw them. When I saw something shimmering among them, I picked it up. I wanted to give it new light by putting it in my work. I found a window frame, and I put broken pieces of glass in it. In these works, I wanted to express the situations of women in constrained spaces. I put a woman's face on the back of a chair, a paradoxical expression of a desire to bolt out of a closed space. I don't believe in achieving 'refinement' through art. Life is vulgar, not elegant. I wanted to break art's aura of 'elegance' through my work. Instead, I wanted to incorporate the sordid without

filtering, to show the reality of our lives now.

KIM In my walks around my neighborhood with my daughter, when we see a chair or other throw-away pieces of furniture we would say, "Let`s take that to Suknam." Expressing women`s lives with cast-off materials seems to be the most appropriate way to express femininity.

YUN I even use oil drums. It`s beautiful!

KIM Favoring oil drum-like women and making them beautiful in your own way really define the aesthetics of paradox in your work. There is a lot in your work that does not exist and that one cannot do. For example, we don`t find the faces of any adult men. The only man to appear in your work is your son..... In your work *Dae-gwon*<sup>8)</sup> men do not have faces. Men are out of fuse. The shoes in your *Kkot-shin*(Flower Shoes) cannot be worn. You did not carve out the foot space, and instead you left a convex block of white in its place. Or the shoes are painted, and thus fixed, inside a box. One cannot sit on the pink chair upholstered in pink silk, because the chair is fitted with a huge steel nails on the seat and on its legs. A chair is a metaphor for a woman`s body. Why do you have metal claws dug into the chairs? Is it an expression of masochism or the grotesque, or is it a paradoxical protestation of the desire to move?

YUN There is a reason for making the shoes un-wearable. In the past, most women could not wear those 'flower shoes'. They were a fantasy only to be looked at, an object of desire only. That is why I volunteered to make the shoes. In dying of old age, one wishes for childhood objects of desire, such as the flower pouch and flower shoes; perhaps that is part of the meaning. I wanted to express the dignity and splendor of the things one could not have. The metal claws in my chair works are organic. They move. The metal claws are designed to come out as they move. At a glance, it seems as if you cannot sit on the chair or the sofa, but if you take a closer look, the claws move like snakes. Perhaps what these works are communicating is that my unintentional bursts of desire look like the metal claws gyrating out of those chairs. Also, I think it is perhaps this aspect that naturally connects to the stretched bodies in the current show. In the chair project, there is more to it than abuse of women`s bodies. The metal claws have an abusive quality, but it is also an expression of a power to move toward something, an expression of women`s inner desires. I am more inclined to think of them in terms of the latter.

KIM Women in your work are unpolished, unshapely, and unattractive. They seem

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8) dae-gwon: The "power to govern a nation," or a presidency -tr.

even self-erasing. However, their ordinary faces dissolve the idea of radical feminism into your work. At the same time the work refuses the objectification of women as the Other. The women`s grave, death-ridden, and un-cosmetized faces embody women as the Other and feminism as the cause. When you are working, is feminism an idea, a body, a discourse that formalizes and reconfirms what the body knows? Or is it a worldview that does not allow a distinction between the body, the hand, and a thought?

YUN Let me talk about the awkwardness of the term 'feminism' before answering that question. When I first started painting, in 1979, 'feminism' was not part of the lexicon in Korea. I painted my mother and the women in local market places. It gave me comfort. My question was why do they have such harsh lives, and why do I have to live the way I do. From the beginning I thought often about why I was doing art, knowing that painting or other art is small and weak. Still, there was a feeling that I was coming out of my illness as I was drawing my mother and other women. Even though the term did not exist then, I think I painted my mother and other women as an allegory of my own scream. The women I met are all unattractive. Actually, I never thought about whether they were or were not attractive. Later I thought personally about what it means to put on make-up, but in relation to feminism I had no spare room to think one way or the other about beauty. For me, being born in Korea and the reality of having to live as a woman could not but bring on feminism, whether you call it by that name or not. Anyway, as my name also indicates,<sup>9)</sup> from when I was young, being feminine was a psychological burden. So I became a tomboy. I was a good tree climber, and I played as if I were a boy. I had a strong sense of competition with boys. I believe that people who experience oppression and alienation have greater understanding and love. People who experience alienation can be much more generous in giving love. In my early 30s I experienced a mental breakdown, and there was no cure for it. As I began painting, the condition of the explosive near-madness began to subside. I think the condition I experienced was similar to 'being seized' that you refer to in your book *What It Means for Women to Write*. I was 'seized' at the time. The mental breakdown and the pain of experiencing the desire to erase oneself, in my case, were relieved through painting, in a way that a shaman might perform a gut; I think this process also naturally brought a rush of desire to speak. This is my feminism.

KIM Why the fluorescent textile on the sofa? The costume jewelry at the end of a long-extended arm? The ice-sharp beads scattered on the floor of a dream

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9) Suknam, a boy` name, was given to the infant girl out of her family`s wish that the next child would be a boy. Such a practice was common in Korea, where there was a strong preference for sons over daughters -tr.

space? The kitschy but still affectionate mother of pearl patterns on the woman`s shoulder? Personally, when I see these they remind me of my own dear mother`s old fashioned tastes, and the hodgepodge of her living room scene full of garrulous women. The faces and the body postures of unexpressive and tough-looking women contrast with the repeating flower patterns. This contrast is similar to that between the silk draped baroque sofa and the metal spikes protruding out of it. What would you like the audience to read from such dissonance between two incongruent elements? Or is it your interpretation that women`s lives have such a dualistic character?

YUN I am going to have to tell a very personal story. When I was a girl, on New Year`s Day and on Chuseok we wore fancy clothes with flecks of gold. But it was only for a day. It didn`t matter if we were a girl or a boy, we could only wear the pink dress with gold flakes for a total of two days out of the whole year. No matter how poor, difficult, and coarse life and its circumstances, I think everyone intrinsically has a desire for beauty. In my case, I think those flower patterns are an expression of such a desire, an intimate one. When I returned home from school, I would see my mother chatting with a group of neighborhood women, in the house, or just outside the gate. I don`t know for sure, but I think much of what they exchanged were sexual jokes. I imagine that is how they dealt with what they had to deal with.<sup>10)</sup> I wanted to connect women`s hopes with their desires for flower patterns. Flower patterns remind me of the desires I had then.

KIM The women in the current exhibition have their four limbs extended out, or they have many faces folded upon them. In *Sowing Light*, the 999 women were a single body and also 999 different bodies. They became a single body through condensation, and 999 bodies through extension. They also became that single body hiding in darkness in fear.<sup>11)</sup> Or perhaps they became 999 bodies because you locked away, not so much that single body, but the very idea that only a thousand could make a whole, the idea that without that single one the 999 women could not each be a whole. To me, the 999 bodies looked like a single body, flowing as a single river of tears. When I put my two feet in the water and took a close look, I could hardly find a single woman with a complete body, as if the women`s bodies were washed away by water. I heard that after the show the women each went her own way into different hands. It really must have been spreading of seeds. Unlike men, interpersonal relations are as important as life itself to women. Why is it that women in your recent works are either many in one or trying to extend their bodies? Why is there a movement, and why is the radius of the movement

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10) The artist`s mother was widowed at a young age. -tr.

11) In *Sowing Light*, apart from the 999 statues installed in the main gallery space, Yun also had a single statue installed in a separate, closed-off room as part of the show. -tr.



becoming bigger? What is the meaning of extending the body? Women with extended arms in your works are sometimes facing another person next to them without looking that person in the eye. Is that person not also a woman? To whom, or toward what, are their arms extended?

YUN After *Pink Room* the bodies started to expand in drawings. Expansion means both an outreach and an attempt to pull out. *Blue Bell* is a work about Yi Mae-chang,<sup>12)</sup> and *Lotus* is about Huh Nan-seol-heon. The body expansions in drawing and woodwork have slightly different meanings. We don't know much about the women who lived four-hundred years ago. I visited the grave site of Yi Mae-chang in Buan<sup>13)</sup>. Although the grave is there as a make-believe one, I felt the symbolism of it so strongly, and I went ahead and obtained her collected poems. Through it all I felt very sad. What did the women then think? I wanted to make my arm long, and reach deep, to draw out an answer to this question. I don't know the answer. I can only imagine, with only bits and pieces of available information, but the extension in my work with wood is an embodiment of this sentiment. I don't know if I'm assuming that their souls have entered me, but that is what I want to pull out. However, when I am drawing, the extended body parts are an expression of my wish to reach out. It is a craving for communication with other women, a desire to share with other women, even if what we communicate is trivial. Another aspect of the extended limbs has to do with the desire to jump out of the reality that confines me and to do, or make, something. I think that is why perhaps the body parts become long. *Pink Room III* is a work I did for an exhibition at the Sydney Biennale in 2000. In this work, a woman sitting in a pit and another woman standing tall are facing each other. The woman standing has lots of force about her, and she is transferring ki(energy) to the other woman who does not know her way. I have always had a hard time looking at a person straight in the eye, but now I want look straight into a person's eye when I talk. Until not too long ago, the characters appearing in my works had half of their faces effaced, but these days the faces seem to come alive. Now I allow them to enjoy a bit more self-confidence.

KIM What makes this exhibition different from your previous shows is probably the fact that pathways are flowing out of women's bodies, which would mean that the bodies are open, not closed. Looking around at the work, I see gestures of women who want to reach out, or who have already reached out. In your earlier works, all the characters are looking in only one direction; their hands are placed

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12) Yi Mae-chang(1573-1610): A Child born out of wedlock between a scholarly father and a mother of unknown profession, she became a gisaeng. She is famous for her chaste affairs and friendship with some of the most celebrated literary luminaries of her time, as well as for her brilliant talent for poetry. -tr.

13) Buan: A town near City of Jeonju, North Jeolla Province. -tr.

on their bodies; they look like jangseung<sup>14)</sup> or Buddha, or people in group photos. But now the women shed such poses; some of them now even have names of people close to you? even I made the list, holding a live heart full of nails in my hand!; they try to look into each other`s eyes; and their long arms hanging by their sides touch each other. Pathways flow out from where their eyes and hands are. *Fish Market II* should be looked at in the same light. Like the many women in *Seeding of the Light-999*, the school of fish in this work are many and one at the same time. They move in one direction, as if they were a single body. When you first began working with wood, you saw water patterns, then they became women`s bodies, and now fish; made of wood, your works are now becoming fluid.

YUN The fish in this work, including those in *Fish Market II*, have a connection to *Seeding of the Light-999*. I thought a lot about that show as I was making the fish. It`s funny that you should mention it. A school of fish swims in one direction. There may be many of them, but they are like one. I often feel that it would take another two or three hundred years before a woman can stand on her own as a complete and independent individual. Until then we must swim together. I made the fish, at times hoping that one of the housewives in my work would show the way for the fish. *Fish Market I* is a work that has a woman with a whale on her head. The woman here is the personification of being in command. I don`t think I should lose that thread of being in command. I should be able to reveal parts of the body and play with them as I please; it makes me apprehensive, but I want to believe that I have the wherewithal to do that. The movement you now see in my work that you didn`t see before is the result of the same logic.

KIM The faces and bodies in your current show have more fleshiness and carnality than ever before. Moreover, I would say that, instead of making assertions, the figures clearly show willingness to transmit their inner worlds to the outside, to hang their insides out. Where does that willingness to show both inside and outside come from? And why do you hang the body in the air to float? What is the relationship between 'to pull out,' 'to be swung' and 'to expand'? Are you trying to pave a road in the air too?

YUN When I came back to drawing again what I first drew was a swing. My works before that were either propped up against a wall or stationed on the ground. I wanted to be freer. I felt that I could be in the air and still connect the earth and the sky and that I could expand. There is an element of insecurity because of the swinging, but there is also a fantasy associated with a swing. There is also a kind of catharsis. I think I missed very much the feeling of riding a swing

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14) Jangseung are traditional wooden 'mile posts' usually made in pairs of male and female figures, and placed in front of a village and on roadsides. -tr.

high into the sky. I am thinking about doing very long arms holding a lotus flower on a swing.

KIM You have a lot of lotus flowers in your work.

YUN Lotus flowers remind me of resurrection.

KIM When one sees your work, one gets an urge to tell the story of one`s own past, or of one`s own mother. That is to say, there is a narrative quality inherent inside and outside of your work. Even looking at the giant dark shadow of the work on the wall, it feels as if the shadow has lips and that they are moving. The stories these lips tell would naturally include the national historical tribulations as well as women`s drama. It seems to me that one could also imagine in detail the stories that you would like to tell. Is it not true that painting is a genre that is known to be the outcome of protracted battles with the epic? Do you believe that the thousands of ideas about painting that have been accumulated over the centuries are in a fight with the narrative character of your work?

YUN That is of the greatest concern to me. I thought that it is a problem I should somehow solve. Starting with Modernists, the very idea of painting was to take the narrative out of it. However, I want to fill my paintings with thousands of stories. So the great current of painting clashes with the narratives in my work. I don`t know what I will do in the future, but for now at least I want to tell stories. If it is not art, that is fine too. But at least for now I want to do this. I would like to think that it is an expansion of art beyond its boundary. Even if that is denied, I still want to do it. I too have a desire to be fashionable and sophisticated. I think I could do it, too. I could do the simplify-and-fill-up-the-canvas drawings. I do get an urge to do a single piece that would cover all the stories. I could go to the height of Minimalism, but I don`t think it`s time for me to go there yet. I think I have to go my own way.

KIM You mentioned Huh Nan-seol-heon and Yi Mae-chang, and there is a mythical aura in your work, and there are countenances that might belong to those mythical women. You bring out the faces of women whose personalities are erased outside of the roles they play in myths.

YUN There is *Blue Face*, the smallest piece in the current show. It is actually a prop. It feels like an oracle to me. I receive a lot of messages from the faces I draw. For example, this is something that happened not too long ago; I told a friend that I was going on a trip, and she raised her hand high to tell me to have a good trip. In that very instant it occurred to me that it was a scene from a myth.

A myth was born out of the instant of saying a goodbye. Our myth is where we must ultimately arrive. That is why I think perhaps painting is necessary. Also, I have a dream. I don't know if it could ever be realized, but I want to paint portraits of those women based on thorough archival documentation. It took only ten minutes to make "Blue Face." Afterwards I felt that the face was not of this world but that it does exist in reality. Other people may not be aware of it, but I alone can feel it. That piece will be the clue to changes in my future work.

KIM A myth belongs to its reader, to its interpreter, and to those who sense its power. Mythologies about women require a dual reading. That is the only way to productively reap the mythological world in the present. You are already doing that. There are really so many faces in your work. What do you feel when you look at those faces?

YUN First of all, the faces have to be fierce. They have to be looking at me fiercely, otherwise they don't become my work. A pretty face doesn't make it. This is not a hang-up on what is pretty. In the beginning, I did paint warm and genial faces of a mother, as in *Daughter and Son*, which is part of the permanent collection at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Gwacheon.<sup>15)</sup> But the more I painted, the less satisfaction such a face gave me. Some people say that they feel that a ghost might jump out of my work. I like that; I want my work to court ghosts.

KIM I have not met any artist who indulges in other artistic genres, especially literature and film, as much as you do. How does the world of literature intervene in your work as a painter?

YUN For *The Seeding of Light* I used one of your poems to make a song and played it as a part of the show. I think it was effective. I am not thoroughly familiar with the works of Korean women poets, but I do get some specific inspiration when I read them. But I can't tell which work specifically. They come out mixed. I also see a lot of films and have a voracious appetite for reading novels. No matter how sentimental they are, the works of female poets touch me.

KIM You did an enormous amount of drawing in the past, even though they are not part of this show. A drawing may be a preparation for main work; it may be a record — in condensation — of the artist's most intimate moment; or it may be the latest manifestation of the artist's lyricism. Looking at your drawings, I find that there is a certain fullness of esprit that is absent in large scale installations. How is your sensitivity different from drawing to doing large scale work in wood? How

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15) The National Museum of contemporary Art, located in Gwacheon, Gyeonggi Province -tr.

does drawing intervene in your installation work?

YUN I am most happy while drawing. I forget myself. On some days, I do seven or eight drawings. I think that is because I can manifest immediately what comes to my mind. Some drawings come out instantly, others may take a whole day. Drawing is very intensive. It is documentational, and it reveals one's inner world candidly. The work in wood takes time. Working on them, I sometimes find that my original plans are completely changed or modified. Of course there is an ecstasy in that process as well. I think perhaps I am more of a drawing person. Drawing transcends space. Installation takes up space and thus cannot overcome it. So I may return to painting, because it transcends space.

KIM Let's take the works of Marisol as an example. She was an outsider in the United States, and her works were treated as being more suitable for ethnographic or folklore studies than for art history. Do you ever worry that your works are interpreted as feminist works; that your materials are very Korean and you also use many ready-made objects in your work; that having been categorized as feminist your work will also be categorized as ethnographic and that it will be marginalized from the mainstream? Granted that such an interpretation might be based on a lack of critical reflection of the past that marginalized women's history, one that follows the conventional authority of art history by people who divide the center from the periphery, do you ever worry that your work will not be part of the art history establishment?

YUN This question can be answered in the same context as the question about narrativity we talked about earlier. An ethnographic coloring of an art work is dangerous. When you do that, people don't look at the work but only the exoticism of it. That is a problem that I have to deal with. Not to say that I'll do away with it, but I think perhaps the problem can be overcome by maximizing the ethnographic and feminist aspects of the work. Conversely, what is 'globalized' can be more dangerous. One could call it self-absorption, but what is local is not synonymous with dwarfism. How one presents it and how one persuades the public is up to the individual artist's ability. I don't think I can ever give that up. What is feminist is inevitably marginalized. Men dominate the Korean art world too. I do not want to worry about that.

(translated by Kyung-hee Lee)

Seoul, Kora

Poem by Kim Hye-soon

The mountains barks  
then follows me

The mountain gives birth  
The mountain licks a mountain  
The mountain? litter sucks on its nipples  
The mountain cold-heartedly discards all of its litter  
The young mountains copulate in broad daylight, the stench  
The mountain roams like the pack of dogs inside a maze

The mountain eats shit, eats a corpse  
The mountain, the mountain full of rashes attacks me with its eyes in flame  
The mountain, the mountain topped with snow cries  
The mountain without a single tree laments with its head flung back towards the sky  
The mountain bites and fights a mountain  
The mountain, the big mountain chases its own tail

Empire? military exterminates the mountain that swarms  
The mountain that survived, the mountain, the mountain climbs over a mountain  
and runs away  
It? still running away

The mountain, the mountain that wants to shed a mountain, brings its palms together and gestures towards the faraway mountain, touches its forehead, brings its hands down to its chest, looks at the faraway mountain once again as it draws its elbows to its waist, then bends its right knee, both hands down on the ground, then bends the left knee, presses its hands down on the ground and sends them far, far away, then prostrates, its entire body touching the ground. Then it cries. The mountain circles a mountain, repeats the whole thing every three steps.

(translated by Don Mee Choi)